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ABSTRACT

In a diverse population such as the one at the University of New Mexico, a population made up of a variety of ethnic groups including Hispanic, Navajo, Japanese, and Anglo students, instructors need to give a voice to every student, to point out differences, similarities, universal and not-so-universal ideas, all of which enrich everyone's store of knowledge. Students in a very reticent English 101 class discussed nonfiction essays prior to writing essays of their own. Class discussion was carried out by only 3 or 4 students out of a class of 20. In an effort to remedy this, an informal questionnaire was completed by the students regarding what would help them to join in class discussions. Following this, on the basis of the students' responses, Benjamin Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives, and various writings on collaborative learning, the instructor provided the students with a series of questions for the essays to be discussed. Students answered the questions before coming to class and then participated in small group discussion based on the questions. The questions were written so that there was one from each of the domains of Bloom's taxonomy. Since there were four different question sheets for each essay and four students per small discussion group, each student in a group had a different sheet of questions and thus a sense of authority. While some students still did not participate in class, many students improved the content of their essays and more students participated in large group discussions. In another diverse, yet vociferous English 101 class, students initiated and directed classroom discussion. Groups of three students presented an essay from the textbook to the class. These student presentations were an outstanding success. Using these strategies, even the quiet students participated in class discussions. (RS)

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## For a Diverse Student Population

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# Group Discussion Strategies

## For a Diverse Student Population

At the University of New Mexico the student population is quite diverse, both by culture and age. This semester, Spring 1991, my English 101 classes include students ranging from 17 years of age to 53 years of age, from a variety of ethnic groups such as Hispanic, Navajo, Japanese, and Anglo. This diversity can enhance the learning of all students, while it may also cause tension and a reticence in students when they are required to share ideas in the classroom. Students soon realize in a smaller classroom of 20 that they do not share a common frame of reference. They realize almost immediately that they are not a homogeneous group. I set out to tap this diversity and give my students tools with which to enter into texts and the conversation of the classroom. Specifically, in my class, the task of discussion involves examining nonfiction essays in The Rinehart Reader so that the students can write their own essays on related topics. It is paramount that they discuss the essays to enrich their store of information which should, in turn, improve and enhance their writing.

After briefly outlining methods of text analysis and summary for the students, I sent them on their way to read, digest and come prepared for class discussion. I was met with hopeful looks and silence. Class discussion was carried by three students who were obviously comfortable with the text and with group discussion. One or

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two other students contributed once, but out of my class of 20 I had really expected greater participation. As the days went by, my expectations for greater participation turned to hopes, and gradually my hopes were replaced by distress. What had I done? What could I do? I started by developing an informal questionnaire to ask the students to anonymously discuss what would help them to join in class discussion. I asked them to generalize their responses to other classes as well, and to truly assess those things that encouraged them to enter into group discussions. I asked two questions: Describe the type of group discussion that you prefer: small (clarify number), large (entire class) or a combination of small and large. The second question asked: What helps you to join in group discussions? Size of group? Questions? Be specific. Here is a sampling of the responses to those initial questionnaires:

> Hispanic, 19, Male: The type of group discussion I prefer is the small, more private, and quiet discussions. I am not as shy or nervous as I would be in a large group conversation. I seem to speak with more openness and freedom. I am not very fond of large discussions because not everyone has a chance to speak out.
>
> Native American, 24, Female: Having predetermined questions helps to lead the thought process; going into a discussion cold leaves me feeling unprepared and I usually don't participate for fear of appearing uninformed. Asking questions with more than a yes or no answer also really helps to keep discussion going.
>
> Anglo, 53, Female: 1) a discussion leader who has leadership qualities. 2) A goal. 3) A purpose. 4) A supportive attitude from the leader. 5) A leader who creates a curious atmosphere.
>
> Anglo, 19, Female: I prefer a large group discussion because I like to listen. I love to talk, but I get really nervous

> speaking out loud in front of people I don't know. A large group discussion allows me to be involved by listening but also allows me to blend in and avoid being singled out to speak aloud. Occasionally, I will express my opinions if I feel confident enough. I do not like to just jump into a group discussion. I would rather someone ask me my opinion or question me directly. A small or large group can bring me into a discussion. If I am not put on the spot I won't say anything because I usually think about it too long first. I start sweating and turning red.

The ambivalence of this last responder, perhaps, best expresses the feelings that many of the student respondents had towards class discussion.

I wanted students to take charge of their own learning, and I wanted to provide them with some tools that they could use, modify, discard, distort, but tools that would enable them to participate in the very fertile field of classroom discussion. I wanted my students to hear themselves thinking and to utilize this thinking in their writing. After reading the student responses, I decided to explore the notion of collaborative learning.

Essentially, collaborative learning finds its roots in social construction theory. Collaborative learning allows the peer group to act as teacher while the teacher acts as coach or director. The teacher must organize individual groups for the specific purpose of encouraging student learning. Collaborative learning is not something to save for a rainy day; it takes a great deal of effort and planning on the teacher's part for collaborative learning to be effective.

Kenneth Bruffee's name continued to surface as I pursued classroom conversation, so I decided to explore his views. In a 1973 article

entitled "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models," Bruffee provides such details as the questions his literature groups use to discover their material, and the means of self-evaluation the students use in writing workshops. The model Bruffee proposes in this particular article was geared towards a literature classroom, whereas I teach nonfiction essays in my English 101 classroom.

While this article was informative, I was more interested in Bruffee's 1984 article, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'." Bruffee states some of "□t•he first steps to learning to think better, therefore, are learning to converse better and learning to establish and maintain the sorts of social context, the sorts of community life, that foster the sorts of conversation members of the community value" (640 1984). Bruffee further explains the importance of classroom discourse when he writes: "our task must involve engaging students' conversation among themselves at as many points in both the writing and the reading process as possible ..." (624 1984). While I do not want to inspire consensus in my group discussions, I do want the students to feel comfortable in the community of the classroom, comfortable enough to disagree with each other and me, the instructor. While reading Bruffee, I also began to look through some of my old texts on teaching methodology. I came across Benjamin Bloom's cognitive taxonomy and was reminded that Bloom's taxonomy offers a viable method not only for instructor-directed questions but as a tool for student-directed, small group discussions.

Taking the student responses, Bloom's taxonomy, and Bruffee's support into consideration, and realizing that group discussion provides an important testing ground for ideas and vital material for student writing, I set out to give each individual student tools for entering the classroom discussion. For the instructor faced with a diverse classroom, Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy provides an accessible avenue not only for the tried and true teacher-directed discussion, but for many variations of small group discussions, both teacher- and student-directed.

The majority of student respondents to my questionnaires had targeted small groups with a purpose/good questions as the most effective means for involving them in group discussion, so I started out with small group discussions with teacher-directed, prediscussion questionnaires.

Using Bloom's taxonomy, I created four different sets of questions for each essay. There were four different essays that we needed to discuss. Each questionnaire included a question from one of Bloom's cognitive domains. I distributed the questionnaires to my classes the class period before the discussion of the four essays. Students were to answer the questions on their sheet before coming to class. On the day of the discussion I placed the students in groups of four with each student in a group having a different question sheet which addressed the same essay. I asked students to do a round robin in their discussion groups and share their answers and ask for responses to their particular question from the group. The questions moved them

from very basic knowledge to evaluative judgments. My motive for creating four different question sheets for each essay was to enable each student to come to small group discussion with a sense of authority, a voice. No one else in their group had the same questions. I hoped that this authority would carry over into whole class discussions as well as into their essay writing.

Here are some of the students' responses to this exercise:

> I thought this group discussion was quite beneficial in that I attempted to answer the questions from the other people's dittoes. I wasn't just answering them to get it out of the way and turn it in for my own benefit. I got to say what I truly thought while trying to answer the other person's questions. Also, it was good in that I got to hear other opinions and views. I didn't necessarily agree with what the others thought but this is a good thing. I am learning to think for myself. Native American, 24, Female.

> I felt the group discussion went very well. It was exciting talking in a smaller, more personal group. I liked using the question sheets because although they were all different questions, we each had a chance to be an expert while also discussing different aspects of the same question. I enjoyed it because it also gives you a chance to interact on a closer level with classmates. Criticism is easier to take and feelings and thoughts are expressed more honestly. Anglo, 17, Female.

> I do not like the smaller groups because even though I had answered the questions, I was uncomfortable having to talk to others. I just read my answers. One good thing was that we all had different questions on the same essay so at least we didn't have to stand out with very different answers. Native American, 27, Female.

While the notion of different questions addressing the same essay seemed to be a success, the small group did not suit some of the students who I hoped it would most benefit, in particular those students who never participated in class. Many of the students did

improve the content of their essays after this individualized small group discussion, and more students participated in the large group discussion. So my efforts were partially successful.

Making up four different questionnaires was an incredible amount of work. Not every instructor has the time to do this, and because of the nature of the program I teach in, I could not justify spending class time introducing Bloom's cognitive domains to the class. However, I think in an introductory writing/reading/thinking course, knowledge of Bloom's taxonomy or other cognitive taxonomies can be used as tools in small group discussion as well as the larger arena of the classroom thinking. Different kinds of thinkers such as Concrete Sequential or Abstract Random could tailor the taxonomy to suit their needs.

After resurrecting Bloom's taxonomy, I recalled the very applicable nature of his cognitive domains to teacher-directed discussion. Many students desire the small group for the opportunity to be heard, but just as many students who answered my questionnaires expressed the desire to, if not participate in the larger group discussion, at least be able to listen to the ideas of more than the two to three people in their small groups. Most student respondents were also in agreement as to the importance of good questions. Bloom's taxonomy provides a hierarchy which allows the instructor, from the elementary level to the college level, to create a comfortable climate by starting out with very accessible types of questions while also

working up the cognitive domain to the more difficult domains in both teacher-directed and student-directed discussions.

Not all of my classes have been reticent when it comes to class discussion. This past semester one of my English 101 classes was very diverse, yet vociferous. Early in the semester I led/modeled class discussions without placing students in small groups. Most students in this class of fifteen participated in our large class discussions. I did not face a silent class, and therefore sought ways in which to turn the discussions over to the students. For this particular class I borrowed a colleague's (Melanie Malinowski) mode for student-directed class discussion, a mode which reverses traditional classroom authority and allows the students to initiate and direct classroom discussion. Although the initial organization lies with the instructor, students direct the discussion.

I divided the students into groups of three and assigned each group a particular essay to present. I distributed Malinowski's directions for student discussion as a guide. The directions are as follows:

> You are responsible for presenting one of the readings in The Rinehart Reader. Below is a list of the group you are part of, the essay your group will present, and the date of presentation. I will give you some class time to work on this project, but I also expect you to get together out of class, even if you merely chat with each other on the phone. You may present any way you want: lecture, discussion, handouts, quiz, overheads, visuals, games. Be creative! Be dull! □Involve the class!● I don't care. You must, however, be in class the day of your presentation: □your group must write two essay questions for your essay●. Good Luck!
>
> *Bracketed sections are my additions to Malinowski's handout.

The student presentations were an outstanding success. Even in my quieter class the students used a variety of strategies for presenting their particular essay and involving the class in discussion. More students participated in class during these student-led discussions. The Rinehart essays these groups presented were the essays that they had to write about for the final exam in English 101. All of my students passed the exchange graded reading of their final essay exam with a grade of C or better, and the majority of their grades were in the B- or better range. I would like to think that giving my students ownership of their learning through student-directed discussion gave them an edge in writing their final exams, but I had no control group with which to compare my results. That will have to wait until next semester.

Thinking is the name of the game and classroom discourse and dynamics change every semester and sometimes every day. In a diverse population such as the one at the University of New Mexico, instructors need to give a voice to every student, to point out differences, similarities, universal and not-so-universal ideas, all of which will enrich everyone's store of knowledge. As a teacher I want my students to get out of their own skin and imagine/discuss the space of the "other," male/female, black/white, etc., and this can only happen when we free the voices in our classrooms. What a loss for our students and ourselves if we did not continually seek the voice, written/spoken, that wants to be free, free to share in the conversation of the classroom.

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